

An Inwardly Loving Community Part 1: A Humble Love

Together in Christ amid Divisive Times Sermon 6

Ephesians 4:1-7

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A sermon given by The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, **2** with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, **3** eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. **4** There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism, **6** one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. **7** But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. (Ephesians 4:1-7, ESV)

What holds a group of people together? What finally binds together a community, or city, or nation?

Written upon the French cannons of Louis XIV was the Latin phrase, *ultima ratio regum*, meaning, “the final argument of the king.” King Louis would hold his empire together, if needed, by force. Obey, or pay the price.

Long before Louis XIV, Roman statesman Cicero, in his own reflections on the ties that bind, wrote: “People are united as a multitude by a common sense of right.” For Cicero, it was a sense of right, or the law and justice, that ultimately kept people together. Both factors, law and force, are indeed ways of keeping people from fracturing; they can manage to hold people together. However, force and law alone don't make for a very compelling unity among people. At their best, they unite around shared respect of law and justice; at their worst, they unite based on fear. But this is not unity—not when we are talking about human beings.

Saint Augustine, in part in response to the fracturing of the Roman Empire, takes up this subject in his major work, *City of God*. He compares the nature of the community created by God to the community ruled by man and asks what ultimately holds God's community together. He comes to a very different answer than others. Ideally, he writes,

A people is...united by a common agreement on the objects of their love...the love with which a man loves God as God ought to be loved, and loves his neighbor as himself.
(Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.24; XIX.23)

Augustine is, of course, drawing directly from Scripture. It is neither threat of violence nor shared commitment to justice that will ultimately unite the people of God—rather, it is a burning love. Jesus says of His followers, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). The Philippian church is called to stay united by “having the same love” (Philippians 2:2). And in our passage for this sermon, Ephesians 4, Paul once again encourages the unity of the Christian community through the power of love:

1...Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, **2** with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another **in love**, **3** eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)

We’ve set Ephesians 4:3 before us as our vision for this fall: amid divisive times, may we maintain our unity of the Spirit here at The Falls Church Anglican. We will spend the next two sermons asking what role love plays in holding us together. In this sermon, focused on Ephesians 4:1-7, we will consider the *disposition* of our love: what type of inner heart condition does the love of community take? Next sermon, we’ll consider Ephesians 4:7-16 and the *experience* of the community’s love, how we express it and share it. Let’s take a closer look at these three verses that open chapter 4.

1 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, **2** with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another **in love**, **3** eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)

Paul opens in *verse 1* by calling the Ephesians to live up to their calling in Christ. The goal of this is that they would, *verse 3*, be united and live in peace together. Paul, in fact, says to be *eager to maintain this unity*. In *verse 2*, Paul sets forth the manner, or you might say the heart dispositions, that are required for them to maintain this unity. There are three: if they are to be united, they need to have **humility, gentleness, and patience**. These qualities then make possible the love he concludes the verse with “through humility, gentleness and patience, bear with one another in love”.

There is one term I want to focus on, which I think may be the most unique in its original setting: the word *humility*. Humility is a certain disposition of the heart, which Paul sets forth at various times as a unique Christian virtue.

Humility is considered a good thing, a virtue, in our world today. This was not the case when Paul used it. The major thinkers and writers of Paul’s day used this term that we translate as “humility” in a pejorative sense. The Greek term literally means “low-disposition.” The Latin term from which we

directly derive “humility”, *humilites*, literally means “near to the ground.” The word conveys someone bent down, subservient, even ashamed. The Greek and Roman culture of Paul’s day was an honor and shame culture. The idea that a person low to the ground, subservient, of a meek disposition, was actually a virtue would have been ridiculous.

When we consider this idea of humility, we are therefore touching upon a nerve of Christianity. Paul has taken an idea and turned it on its head. Somehow, in light of what God has done in Jesus Christ, to be low and subservient, is to be high and dignified.

To be low is to be high; to serve is to lead. Here we touch a nerve at the very center of Christianity.

Paul does not give us a neat and tidy definition. Rather, we need to consider the larger atmosphere of the Apostle’s life to see what humility really is, and how it grows. I’ll suggest a few aspects of humility, or what we’ll call *humble love*: It grows in the shadow of the almighty, it is inspired by the example of the Son, and it is cultivated by sharing Christ’s heart.

I. Shadow of the Almighty

Here, I want to stress that humility begins not so much by a low view of oneself, but by a big vision of God.

1. Misconceptions

It is not a surprise that the ancients didn’t see this term we render in English with “humility” as something positive. It is in no way obvious that a low-disposition or subservience would be a good thing.

i.) It is not insecurity or self-protection. We too need to be careful not to mistake things for real humility, such as, insecurity or fear of man. Sometimes when we are simply insecure, or fearful of people, we *seem* humble. But this type of deference or timidity is only indicative of self-preservation. And, as we’ll see below, humility at its heart, is not self-preservation but self-sacrifice.

ii.) It is not self-abasement. Neither is humility rooted in an unhealthy self-abasement, where the self simply tries to lower its own estimation of itself.

iii.) **Rather, humility originates not in a low view of the self, but in a big view of God, where the creature is rightsized in relation to reality.** It is in the shadow of the Almighty, before and under God, that humility originates, and we can see this if we consider two aspects of standing before God. Humility originates before God's *greatness* and under God's *grace*.

2. God's Greatness

Biblically, humility is nothing less than the creature's recognition of their Creator. A great example comes from a scene in Revelation 4. The twenty-four elders are gathered near the throne of God. These are the very opposite of insecure men; these are some of the greatest men who ever lived. They are in fact even crowned. But notice how the scene unfolds:

10...the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, **11** "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." (Revelation 4:10-11)

The casting down of a crown is not indicative of self-loathing or an unhealthy insecurity; rather, it is the only logical response when a creature beholds the reality and majesty of its maker. When standing before God, we find little desire to put out our chest in pride. Even the biggest, smartest and most impressive ant in the ant farm gets rightsized in the shadow of the elephant. So too, the seemingly greatest of men is stunningly small when standing in the shadow of the Almighty.

3. God's Grace

We are not only right sized in the shadow of the Almighty, but we are made aware of a great need. Before the greatness of God, our own uncleanness and unworthiness come into sharpest relief. Such was the case when Isaiah stood before God on his throne in Isaiah 6. The prophet can only utter: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5)

Humility is being right sized by the greatness of God, then softened by His grace.

To receive grace is to have become aware of your need for it; it means you've become aware of your wound, your own failings, your own faults, your own insufficiency. You are one who knows what it

means to hope, not in yourself, but in another, and to be rescued. Even the most seemingly competent woman finds that her sharp edges are softened when she lives beneath the grace of God.

True humility is not cultivated by a human taking stock merely of himself. Rather, true humility only grows in the shadow of the Almighty, when the creature is right sized by God's greatness and softened by God's grace. Surely this is where Paul's view of humility began. But it was further sharpened by an example and exemplar. Humility is further inspired in us by the example of the Son.

II. By the Example of the Son

Paul clearly takes his cues about humility from the example of Christ, which he explains in detail in Philippians 2. In that chapter he calls the Philippians to "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). Paul then goes on to show them that his humility is an imitation of the humility of Christ:

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, **6** who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, **7** but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. **8** And being found in human form, **he humbled himself** by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

What comes to the fore here, is that the humble heart is not only right sized and softened by God but transformed in its orientation towards others. It becomes increasingly others-centered rather than self-centered. We see this when Paul reminds us that Christ "took on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." He means that Christ was not by nature our servant, but in an expression of God's humility, Christ became our servant. The passage tells us further that the service was sacrificial, Christ "humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

What form does your heart typically take? Does it take the form of competing with brothers and sisters in the church? Does it take the form of needing to take from brothers and sisters in Christ? Does it take the form of judging brothers and sisters in Christ? Or does it take the form of a servant of brothers and sisters in Christ.

I know a woman who asks, when you walk in a room, are you a 'here I am' person or a 'there you are' person? I think this means that we are to be inspired by Christ's example to increasingly form our hearts unto serving our brothers and sisters in Christ. But this is not easy nor is it natural. To take on

the form of a servant is to let go of yourself, to lay down your life, to seek the benefit of others before yourself. I want to turn then to a third point that asks how we go about cultivating a heart like this. And the answer is that we don't cultivate our own heart on our own—rather, we increasingly share the heart of Christ. Or our hearts are increasingly taken over by the heart of Christ.

Humility is both the creature's rightsizing in the shadow of God the Father, and the creature's participation in the heart of the Son, but this is all worked into our disposition as the Spirit joins our heart to the heart of Christ. Humility, thirdly, requires sharing the heart of Christ.

III. Sharing the Heart of the Son

Sometimes the best way to form your heart is to get in touch with the heart of someone else. I worked for a little while with a sports ministry, and at a few camps, I worked alongside a gifted college football player. He was big, strong, popular, and so I thought, cocky. I didn't like him much, and if I'm honest, was a little intimidated by him. This meant my heart was very cold towards him; I even think, to my shame, I had a sense of pride thinking I was more spiritually mature. Over the next few years, however, I got to know his father. Through the father, I learned some of the son's story, some hardships of the family. I could see how deeply the father loved his son. The son became softer in the eyes of the father. He became more human. I found that from then on, I couldn't be around this big tough football guy without feeling a deep, deep sense of compassion. You could say that my heart was humbled by feeling the father's love for his child.

The way to tenderize your heart towards the people of God, the way to cut off the root of pride, is to share Christ's heart for your brothers and sisters in Christ.

1. See them through His eyes

They are objects of the Father's love and people that God's grace is at work in.

2. Think about them like Christ does—often and compassionately

What do you think about? Issues? How about people? We think about the people we resent or loathe. Make a discipline to think of one or two people from your church each week. Wonder how they are. Think about their story. Call to mind their needs.

3. Love others like Christ

Pray. Ask God to do for them what you want God to do for you. In this, your heart begins to take the form of Christ's heart—a heart guided by humble love. A heart that will obey the Father at all costs. A heart that is aflame for the service of others.

True humility is not self-loathing or insecurity or the fear of man. True humility is a creature right sized before its maker, inspired by the example of the Son, and increasingly sharing the Son's compassion for God's people.

What if our church has this atmosphere? What if we were marked by a humble love? What if we were one community on earth, the one people, united not by fear or by law, but by a humble love?